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COVER: Detail of the early Middle Horizon tapestry fragment in William J Conklin's article "Peruvian Textile Fragment from the Beginning of the Middle Horizon". Photograph by Allen C. Marceron.

DRAWINGS by: William J Conklin for "Peruvian Textile Fragment from the Beginning of the Middle Horizon"; Sally Huddles for "Symbolic Scenes in Javanese Batik"; Milton Sondag for "A Type of Mughal Sash".

PHOTOGRAPHS of Textile Museum's illustrations are by Allen C. Marceron and Osmund L. Varela. All other photographs are courtesy of American Museum of Natural History, The Brooklyn Museum, William J Conklin, Kelemen Archive, Elisabeth Z. Kelemen, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Taylor & Dull.

INDONESIAN TEXTILES AT THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

MONNI ADAMS

An exhibition of Indonesian textiles, drawn for the most part from the holdings of the Textile Museum, was opened in its galleries in mid-October of 1970. The Museum has one of the largest and most representative collections of Indonesian textiles in this country and the nearly one hundred selected fabrics on view represent the diversity of style and technique found throughout the Island Republic.

Much has been written on the techniques and on the beauty and wealth of ornament in Indonesian textiles. The special theme of the exhibition is the pictorial imagery in the cloths. Seen from this approach, there is a remarkably wide range of expression. The images include scenes from heroic epics, fantastic dream-like landscapes, heraldic compositions and symbols of good luck and prosperity. In this variety of images, the textiles reflect the rich cultural heritage of Indonesia.

For some Westerners, the appeal of the textiles lies in their luxurious appearance. Especially admired are the gleaming colored silks decorated with gold or silver threads. These silks and the aristocratic gold-leaf cottons, both of which are produced only in Western Indonesia, provide a brilliant focus for the exhibition. For others, what pleases the eye are the stark rhythms and earth colors of the thick cotton ikats from Eastern Indonesia.

Between these extremes lies a great number of types from different islands, cloths which vary in material, technique and designs. Of all these perhaps the most widely known are the batik cloths of Java. These batiks measure about one yard in width by three yards in length. They are decorated by a painstaking process of drawing the designs in molten wax on both sides of a white cloth, subsequently dyeing it blue and brown and finally removing all the wax. Even the cloths made for everyday wear employ beautiful designs.

Because Java has long been the seat of government, officials have had many ceremonial and trade relations with foreign powers. These contacts have influenced designs in batik. However, the tenacity of traditional Indonesian designs can be seen in the batik motifs of mountains, trees, ships and sacred houses, recognizable from architecture and carvings dating hundreds of years ago or from still-living traditions in remote areas of Indonesia. Formerly certain batik designs were reserved only for royalty. However, in the present democratic era, "royal" patterns have become widely used even for batiks worn in daily life by common people.

Connoisseurs quite rightly value Indonesian textiles for their wealth of ornament. Designs of all kinds seem to tumble freely out of the cornucopia

formed by delicate Javanese, Sumatran and Balinese hands. In batik alone, someone has counted three thousand designs—and there are more. Whatever its character, no design looks mechanical. However geometric, it is relieved by small, graceful touches; however, naturalistic, it is drawn into the rhythm of a pattern. It is this wavering, ambiguous quality which gives Indonesian design its lasting visual interest.

Of widely differing religious traditions, the people of Indonesia share certain spiritual attitudes, a deep respect for ancestors and kinship ties and a feeling of communion with cosmic forces through the medium of symbols. These values are reflected in the textiles in both figurative and schematic designs.

One of the challenges of the exhibition lies in the "reading" of the designs. In some of the textiles, the images occur in a disguised fashion, almost hidden by elaborate ornament. Viewed vertically, a fine, densely patterned cloth of South Bali is covered with pleasing designs; viewed horizontally, it reveals a scene of seated costumed figures. Even in the large bold designs of Sulawesi cloths, what appear at first sight to be strict schematic arrangements emerge on second glance as human figures, linked as in an endless series of ancestors.

In textiles of other areas, the images stand out clearly but the poses of the figures presented in heraldic form are puzzling. For example, the large ship depicted in a weaving from Sumatra, one of the outstanding pieces of the exhibition, provides a clear central image with many details. For us, it is, nevertheless, a mystery ship because there is little information about the meaning of the designs from the people who make the cloth.

Some images function as obvious symbols of prestige, such as the pair of confronting lions shown on Sumba textiles. The lions are adapted from the Dutch coat of arms which appeared on official agreements and on large silver coins, treasured by the royal class of Sumba. However, the roaring, clawing, rampant beasts on the coins have been transformed on the textiles into docile animals of alert and cheerful mien.

Many foreign influences have enriched the artistic inventory. Indonesia lies at the crossroads of the South China and the Indian Oceans and its rich natural resources have been a target in sea trade. In return for its products, Indonesia could satisfy its desire for metal and for textiles, two of the favored means of artistic expression. The taste for beauty and complexity of design has made Indonesia, for centuries, an important market for imports from South and East Asia, India, Thailand and China.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, for example, textiles from India decorated with small floral designs were especially favored in Indonesian ports. This traditional trade has continued into modern times and brought Indian silk and cottons to all parts of the archipelago. Thus, in many Indonesian islands, the influence of these decorated Indian textiles called *tjinde* or *patola* raised the complexity of local patterns and increased the quantity and naturalism of floral ornament. To illustrate the relationship, the exhibition includes a display of *patola* silk from India near its counterparts in Indonesia.

The cultural heritage of India goes far deeper than exchange of goods. In Java and Bali, the people have adopted Indian literature much as Europeans clasped to their breasts the stories from the Old Testament, using them for plays and other arts. The strong attachment is reflected in two kinds of art objects on view in the Museum: the famous puppets and painted cloths, both of which concern characters and events from the love story of the epic Ramayana and from the battle of the heroes in the Mahabharata.

On the other hand, the Javanese share certain artistic preferences with the Chinese such as a deep fondness for landscape and for monsters, themes illustrated in the exhibition (balcony galleries).

According to tradition, Khubilai Khan tried to invade East Java in the 13th century but was defeated. However, thousands of ancient porcelains testify to long trade relations with South China. Especially in the 15th century when Canton was an Islamic center and the North Javanese princes were turning to Islam and establishing Sultanates along the North Coast, relations with South China may have been decisive in fostering Islam in North Java. Court records in the Sultanate of Tjeribon,

for example, refer to the wife of the first Sultan as a Chinese princess who brought shiploads of goods and artisans to the court. It is no surprise, then to find wood carving and textile design revealing strong influence from Chinese style. These borrowings may represent renewal of traditional themes. As Claire Holt, the late specialist in Indonesian art, has remarked: "When the Garuda bird arrived in Indonesia, he found another bird very much like himself already there."

In many places in Indonesia, questioning the craftsmen who design the big birds, ships or other figures elicits no ready explanation of the symbolic meaning. To interpret the designs, one resorts to an indirect method related to a deep-seated reluctance on the part of the people to discuss such matters directly or openly. In the arts of language, this reluctance leads to a great wealth of verbal games and disguises, and in the visual arts, presumably, to a preference for symbols. Interpretation then becomes an art in itself. The exhibition aims to give throughout a context for understanding the imagery. The study of the designs is a newly opened field and there are many interesting puzzles as yet unsolved. In the Textile Museum's exhibition, the public is invited to share some of the attempts to decipher Indonesian design.

To complement the display of textiles and to underscore their themes, a variety of decorative ornaments, wood carvings, dance masks, puppets and weapons have been borrowed from the Indonesian Embassy, the Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution, and a number of private collectors.

The Indonesian Textile Exhibition will remain on view through April 1971. The galleries are open free to the public from 1 to 5 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays. (Closed on all legal holidays.)

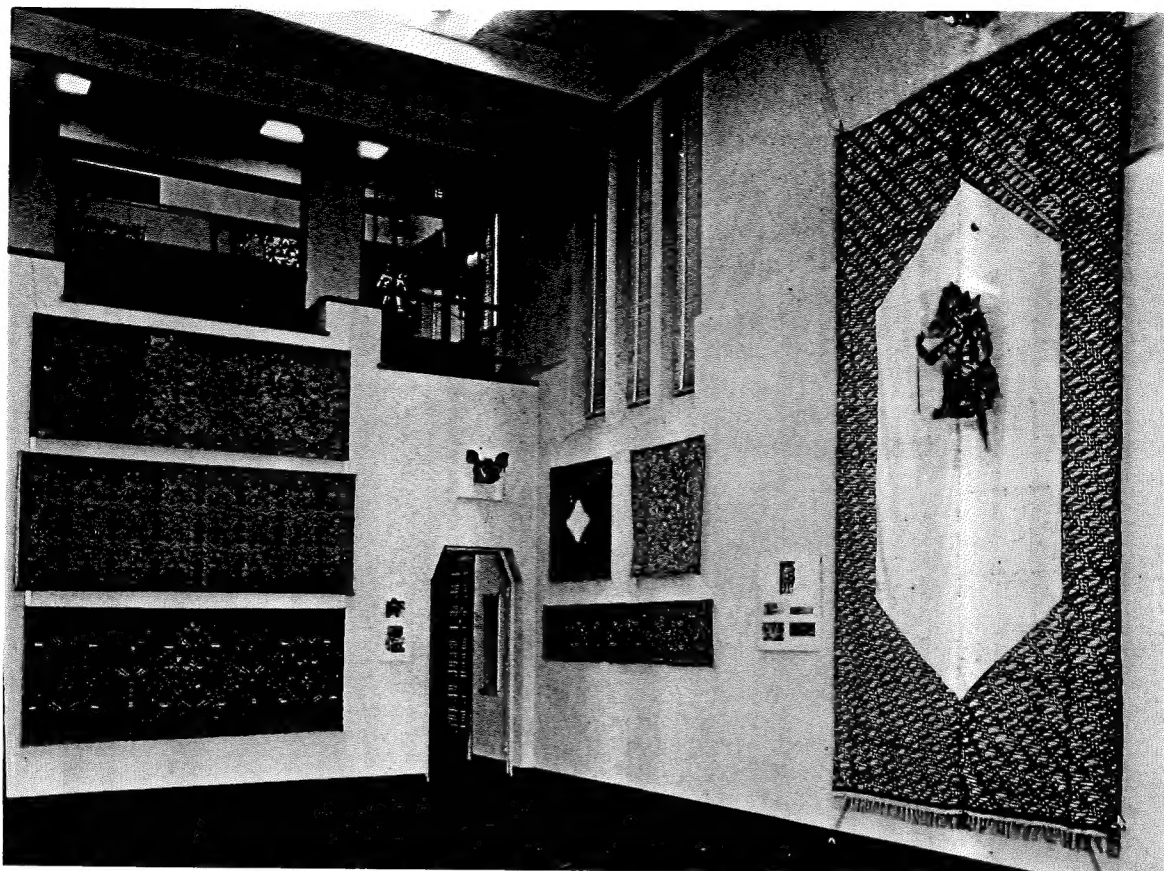
Indonesian Embassy personnel in native costumes at the opening of the Indonesian Textile Exhibition.





His Excellency, the Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia and Mrs. Soedjatmoko, and Museum Trustees Mrs. Matthew W. Stirling and Dr. Junius B. Bird, at the Indonesian Textiles Exhibition reception. Below: some of the members and guests in the Museum garden during the reception.





Gallery views of the Indonesian Textiles Exhibition, October 1970-April 1971.

